
A cough, a call, and “butterfly effects” of 2020: Reflection at the genesis of adulthood

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I was born in 2001, in the borough of Queens, New York, USA. Just ten years later, I learned an early lesson in how a major event could occur and change the direction of one’s life story. Hurricane Sandy hit the northeastern United States in October 2012, killing nearly 100 of my fellow Americans and dozens of others, causing over \$70 billion in damages, and changing my life (CNN, 2020). It destroyed our home, turned our lives upside-down. After living with my family in a series of temporary shelters and hotels, we finally settled that November in a home in Harlem, historically Black and Latinx neighborhood in Manhattan, just after my country re-elected its first Black president, Barack Obama, to serve a second term as president. I took away from this that hard times and momentous upheavals could be followed by promise, by opportunity. This lesson carried me through middle school, through to high school, and I take it with me as I begin my path through college. That lesson has been critical this year, as my freshman experience has felt like the aftermath of a hurricane, full of change and uncertainty – but also hope.

I find that sharing even this brief outline of my life can be an important way to give scholars, like those of the British Society of Criminology, insight into the inner world of people like me. For my generation, the events of 2020, like Hurricane Sandy in 2012, have changed the courses of our lives. This year will shape important beliefs about our world: whether it is just (i.e., just world beliefs; Lerner, 1980), whether the system is legitimate (i.e., system justification; Jost & Banaji, 1994), where we belong within our nation's fabric (i.e., uncertainty-identity theory; Hogg, 2007), whether our leaders can be trusted (i.e., legitimacy perceptions; Tyler, 1990), whether the law is on our side (i.e., legal estrangement; Bell, 2016). My professor, with whom I write this missive, has found that individuals weave collective experience into their individual life

narratives in ways that determine their interpretations of subsequent events -- including, or perhaps especially, events involving government and the law (Blount-Hill, 2020).

Professor Blount-Hill and his colleagues have noted that “Ways of gaining knowledge must ... adapt to the type of knowledge being sought” (St. John et al., 2019, p. 55). This brief reflection presents my story using summary narrative, storytelling focused on main narrative points for the purpose of brevity. By narratives, we mean “temporally ordered statement[s] concerning events experienced” (Presser, 2009, p. 178), and by storytelling, “the act of communicating narrative to another” (Blount-Hill, 2020, p. 2). Narratives told by main characters themselves make “the full scope of perceived experience ... accessible” for analyzing in ways that interview responses or surveys cannot – making available so-called “privileged knowledge,” (Ajil & Blount-Hill, 2020, p. 90; St. John et al., 55). Better than anyone else, I can tell you how this year has shaped my experience forever.

In early 2020, my twelfth grade (“senior”) year in high school was going smoothly. True, I had concerns about finishing my classes, paying off my senior dues, getting into college. Though high school had its challenges, I had passed the Scholastic Aptitude Test, one of two primary qualifying examinations to determine students’ readiness for college and had completed all statewide testing requirements for graduation too. When asked about my mindset at the beginning of 2020, honestly, it would have to have been excitement about the future. My school had numerous celebratory activities planned for my 2020 cohort’s senior year, including class trips and, of course, prom. This would all culminate in a graduation ceremony where my family could finally celebrate eighteen years of investment into getting me through my primary and secondary education. There was another big process I looked forward to: college. Before the pandemic broke out, and social distancing restrictions followed, we at least had the chance to go on a college trip. For someone who has not traveled much, getting to visit different places, visit various college campuses, really, just to sleep at a hotel ... that trip was so fun.

The COVID-19 pandemic suddenly hit New York City in March 2020, starting weeks of people getting sick and people dying (Francescani, 2020). I can recall the stories in the news, the pictures of morgues overcrowded, being told about mass graves (Anderson, 2020). Our Mayor closed our schools and ordered citywide shelter-in-place, essentially a quarantine or “lockdown” which lasted throughout the month I was supposed to have had my prom, my senior trip, and my high school graduation. School did not stop during the pandemic. We still had to complete assignments and finish grading and graduation requirements. But the period tremendously stressed me out. For twelve years, all my classes had been in person. Now, everything was virtual. I am not sure I ever got used to online classes, but certainly in the beginning it threw me off track, impacted my grades and stymied my motivation. Despite still having class, all the fun things about school (e.g., meeting people, hanging out after class) and all the special parts of a senior year (e.g., prom, graduation) were ultimately ruined by this unfortunate circumstance. That is how I felt about my senior year, “ruined”. Yet, I persevered.

These thoughts and concerns followed me into college. Like every first-year college student, I was excited about entering my first year. But, like the final months of my high school experience, my college would be online. All the excitement I had was accompanied by anxiety, and the beginning of the semester was nerve-racking. I must say I was glad I got the chance to go to college, not everyone does. But, having to do it online I wanted the “real” college experience, the amazing experiences I had heard so much about. I know I feel less motivated, but it is like I am not sure how to get myself back on track. Even my grades have not always been what I would have hoped, as online class is not really motivating at all for me. Sure, my first semester performance has been alright, but I know I would have done much better if my classes had been in person.

Still, I am also studying criminal justice in 2020, which has been a real plus. Studying the justice system has meant work related to the major social movement of the time, calls for police reform and highlighting that #BlackLivesMatter after the killing of George Floyd. While tragic, his death not only sparked civic engagement in the streets, but also helped me better understand the value of my college program. Because of

how real this made studying criminal justice, I have been much more interested than I would have been otherwise, and much more aware of the serious problems we have in this world. In the 1999 science fiction film, *The Matrix*, Morpheus encourages Neo, the main character, to take a red pill that disconnects him from the fake, computer-generated reality he lives in and wakes him up to the ugly truth of the world. Realizing that we have such serious problems in the American criminal justice system, on top of larger social problems revealed by the pandemic, forced me to “take the red pill” and not be so naive.

My professor asked me to consider what this all meant for me. How will this shape the way I think about my future, my country, and my role in it? At the beginning of 2020, I was sure I wanted to become a federal law enforcement agent. I still do, but these times have caused me to question my judgment a bit. Whatever I choose, all in all, I know I want to be someone that adds value to my community and to the others around the world, bringing positive changes and being an involved citizen. Being Black in America, unfortunately, means I must be more cautious about what I do, but this also encourages me to pay more attention to the world around me, especially how I vote, because my voice matters today. More than anything, I have to persevere. I always have to persevere, through hard times, no matter what. Reflective exercises like this help because I remember that I have done it before. Hurricane Sandy, the novel coronavirus, the consequences of police violence – I have lived it all and have overcome it all.

What does will this mean for how I see my future? When my professor asked this, I reflected to the butterfly effect. A term “often used to emphasize the outsize significance of minute occurrences”, the concept basically illustrates how one tiny flap of a butterfly’s wing causes a small, but growing, ripple that may grow into a tornado (Vernon, 2017, p. 130). (Though, apparently, this is a little different than what its originator meant; Lorenz, 1972; Dooley, 2009; Palmer, Döring, & Seregin, 2014). If 2020 showed little else, it demonstrated how a cough in one part of the world, or a 9-1-1 call and murder in another, could create ripples that dramatically impacted me here in New York. That can be scary, as it means that so much of my life is subject to change due to actions of billions of other people. But it is also hopeful because it

means that my life can be the flap of the butterfly's wings, that I can change the world for billions, if not directly, by starting a chain reaction of small acts of good that catch on and grow into large positive impact.

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